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ABSTRACT

An often-noted contrast between child and adult language is that young children produce sentences both with and without lexical subjects even if subjects are obligatory in the adult system. However, in Dutch, there is no such structural difference between the earliest stages of Dutch child grammar and the adult stage where subjects are concerned. The missing subjects in finite structures can not be explained by a prodrop theory. Predictions made with the prodrop theory for Spanish or Italian do not occur in Dutch. Instead, a "topic-drop" theory can explain missing subjects, which occur only in finite sentences when the verb is in first position. In addition, Dutch developmental facts contradict the hypothesis that Dutch children have no sense of verbal inflection of subject-verb agreement. In fact, they appear to have this at an early age. There is no difference between Dutch child and adult language in non-finite structures where there are no person-number features. While there is a subtle difference in possible illocutionary forces in children's topic-comment structures, compared to adults', the systematic difference is non-syntactic, and similar patterns are found in German. Therefore, proposals to explain missing subjects in English through lack of inflection should be re-examined. (MSE)

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"WHAT'S MISSING IN DUTCH?"

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0. INTRODUCTION

Theories about child grammar usually try to account for differences between child and adult language. An often noted and presumably universal contrast is that young children produce both sentences with and without lexical subjects even if subjects are obligatory in the adult system. Many different proposals have been offered to explain the phenomenon of missing subjects in child language. Here, I would like to convince you that there is no structural difference between the earliest stages of Dutch child grammar and the adult stage where subjects are concerned.

1. EARLY DUTCH IS NOT A PRODROP SYSTEM

First, I will argue that the missing subjects in finite structures cannot be explained by a theory of prodrop, as proposed by Hyams (1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1989). A prodrop theory would explain null subjects in child language in the same way as null subjects in adult systems like Italian or Spanish: there is a particular parameter setting that allows for null subjects. Without getting into the details of prodrop theories, I will focus on two important implications of positing such a theory for early child language:

(A) missing subjects should occur regardless of the position of the finite verb, as is the case in Italian or Spanish.
(B) we expect a transition away from missing subjects in the acquisition of a non-prodrop language.

These predictions are not borne out for Dutch. I concluded this on the basis of data searches, involving about 3000 utterances from 3 Dutch children between 20 and 25 months old. First, we find missing subjects only in two specific syntactic environments:

(A) when the finite verb is in first position (as is shown under (1)-(2))
(B) in non-finite structures

I will discuss the finite structures first, since prodrop theories specifically deal with these.

(1) Finite structures with verb in first position and missing subject in Dutch child language [1]

a. zakt steeds af (Fedra 23) (<it> keeps sliding down)
(slides-3SG constantly down-PRT)
b. kom zo weer terug (Fedra 23) (<I> will be back in a minute)
(come-1SG shortly again back-PRT)
c. ga kusje geven (Tobias 23) (<I> will go give a kiss)
(go-1SG kiss-DIM give-INF)

(2) Unattested finite structures in Dutch child language: some constituent precedes the fronted finite verb:

a. % steeds zakt af [2] (<it> keeps sliding down)
(constantly slides-3SG down-PRT)
b. % zo kom weer terug (in a minute <I> will be back)

[1] Behind each child's sentence you will find the name of the child who uttered it, plus age in months at the time or recording. The Dutch data from Fedra and Tobias were assembled by Jacqueline Frijn; the data from Chantal by Lisan van Beurden. Laura's data were collected by Jacqueline van Kampen and put into a data system by Jacqueline Frijn (all at University of Utrecht, Netherlands).
[2] The "%" indicates "unattested". Since we are dealing with child language, not intuitions, we cannot make definite claims about "ungrammaticality".

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(shortly come-1SG again back-PRT)
c. % kusje ga geven (a kiss I will go give)
(kiss-DIM go-1SG give-INF)

Second, the phenomenon of a missing constituent when the finite verb is in first position is not restricted to child language. Very similar to the data under (1), we find the ones under (3) in adult Dutch. Parallel to the unattested examples under (2), where some constituent precedes the finite verb, you will find the ungrammatical adult examples under (4).

(3) Structures with finite verb in first position and missing subject in Dutch adult language:
a. heb hem deze week al vijf brieven geschreven
(have-1SG him this week already five letters written)
(<I> have written him five letters already this week)
b. geeft haar altijd bloemen op zaterdag
(gives-3SG her always flowers on Saturday)
(I have written him five letters already this week)
(<S/he> always gives her flowers on Saturdays)

(4) Ungrammatical adult Dutch examples: missing subjects when some constituent precedes the fronted finite verb:
a. *deze week heb hem al vijf brieven geschreven
(this week have-1SG him already five letters written)
(This week, <I> have written him five letters already)
b. *haar geeft altijd bloemen op zaterdag
(her gives-3SG always flowers on Saturday)
(To her, <s/he> always gives flowers on Saturdays)

This strongly suggests that very young Dutch children do not have a grammar like Italian or Spanish where missing subjects are concerned. Neither early Dutch nor adult Dutch is a prodrop system. Then how can we explain that we do find null subjects in structures as under (1) and (3)?

2. MISSING CONSTITUENTS IN DUTCH ARE MISSING TOPICS

I will argue that a theory of "topic-drop", as presented by De Haan & Tuijnman (1989) along the lines of Huang (1984) can provide an explanation for the phenomenon of missing subjects in Dutch. For this purpose, it is important to have some understanding of the basic and derived syntactic Dutch structure:
The underlying word order is SOV. In main clauses, where no complementizer fills the COMP-node, the finite verb has to move to COMP. To derive declarative word order, some constituent has to be topicalized to a position immediately preceding COMP, thus creating the well-known V2 effect. The relevant structures are shown in (5)-(6).

(5) Underlying structure in Dutch (embedded finite)
zij zei $[_{CP}\ [_{C}$ dat$][_{VP}$ Lisan $_{s}$ me $_{IO}$ dit $_{O}\ [_{V}$ heeft gestuurd]]]
(she said that Lisan has sent me this)
(she said that Lisan has-3SG sent-PSTPRT)

(6) a. Subject topicalization:
$[_{topic}$ Lisan$_{i}]\ [_{CP}\ [_{C}$ heeft$_{k}\ [_{VP}\ [\ _{i}]$ me dit $[_{V}\ _{k}$ gestuurd]]]
(Lisan has-3SG me this sent-PSTPRT)
(Lisan has sent me this)

b. Object topicalization:
$[_{topic}$ dit$_{i}]\ [_{CP}\ [_{C}$ heeft$_{k}\ [_{VP}$ Lisan me $[\ _{i}]\ [_{V}\ _{k}$ gestuurd]]]
(this has-3SG Lisan me sent-PST-PRT)
(this Lisan has sent me)

Now in certain languages, an empty topic can identify an empty element in the clause on the basis of contextual information (Huang 1984). Thus, in (7) the topicalized subject Lisan has been dropped, and in (8) the object dit (this). For these examples, I have included possible discourse contexts to enhance clarity, and consequently the chance of convincing you.

(7) Topic drop - topic=subject:
discourse: Wat deed Lisan? (What did Lisan do?)
heeft me dit gestuurd
(has-3SG me this sent-PSTPRT) (<Lisan> has sent me this)

(8) Topic drop - topic=object:
discourse: Waar heb je dit vandaan? (Where did you get this?)
heeft Lisan me gestuurd
(has-3SG me Lisan sent-PSTPRT) (<this> Lisan has sent me)

Topic-drop explains why we only find finite sentences with missing subjects when the verb is in first position. The derivation of Dutch declarative main clause word order creates an excellent environment for topic drop: in declarative main clauses there always is a topicalized constituent. What is missing in Dutch is not directly an object or a subject, but a topic, both in child and adult language.

3. WHY LEXICAL SUBJECTS ARE OBLIGATORY

If the Dutch child system is like the adult's, this implies that somehow lexical subjects are required even for the youngest Dutch child. Many interesting proposals have been made that link missing subjects to the lack of inflection in early child language (a.o. Clahsen (1987), Lebeaux (1987), and Jaeggli & Hyams (ms-19xx)). Unfortunately, I will not be able to discuss these within the boundaries of this paper. What is important here is that the Dutch developmental facts seem to contradict the hypothesis that the youngest Dutch children do not have any sense of verbal inflection or subject-verb agreement at all.

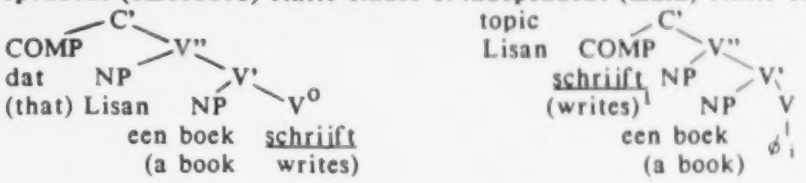
Subject-verb agreement in Dutch child language
First of all, the data show a distinctive distribution between the finite forms of a verb and infinitive ones. The first occur only at the left periphery (first or second position), the latter only at the right periphery (De Haan 1986). If the child had no way of distinguishing between different verbal forms, we would not expect this. Examples are given under (9) and (10).

(9) finite examples: finite verb at left periphery
a. ik ga ook douchen (Laura 23) (I will also take a shower)
(I go-1SG also shower-INF)
b. moet Kees taartjes bakken (Tobias 20)
(must Kees pastries-DIM bake-INF) (Kees has to bake pastries)
c. zakt steeds af (Fedra 24) (<it> keeps sliding down)
(slides-3SG constantly down-PRT)

(10) infinitive examples: finite verb at right periphery
a. limonade drinken (Tobias 20)
(lemonade drink-INF)
b. vogeltje taartje bakken (Tobias 20)
(bird-DIM pastry-DIM bake-INF)
c. Kees huilen (Tobias 20)
(Kees cry-INF)

We can explain this exclusive distribution most naturally if the leftmost verbal position is COMP from the earliest stages on, just like in adult language. During the first developmental stages, the child does not have embedded clauses yet. The COMP-node is strictly finite and strictly verbal at first. I follow Weerman and assert that the COMP has to be lexical in Dutch to assign a modal role and finiteness features to the VP. The modal role involves the speaker's attitude toward the truth value of the proposition that is expressed. The lexicalization of COMP can be effected by either a finite complementizer or a finite verb. But in early child language, the only way a sentence can be finite is when the verb occurs under COMP. When the child acquires embedded clauses, COMP can also be lexicalized by a finite complementizer, and the finite verb can then appear in base position at the right periphery. COMP has to be lexicalized to assign finiteness features to the VP, so that the finite verb can appear under V^0. The I-affix is the morphological reflex of these finiteness features. The structures under (11) exemplify this.

(11) a. **dependent (embedded) finite clause** b. **independent (main) finite clause**



Compare to:
c. *Lisan een boek schrijft (*empty finite COMP)
(Lisan a book writes-3SG)
d. *dat schrijft Lisan een boek (*complementizer + V in COMP)

Second, if you compare the adult's paradigm (12) with the examples under (13), you can conclude that all the inflectional affixes that occur in the adult system are already available at a very young age.

(12) ADULT PARADIGM

FINITE (pres.tense)		INFINITIVE +(e)n
SG	PL	STEM: -
1. -	+(e)n	
2. - or +t	+(e)n	
3. +t	+(e)n	

(13) EXAMPLES FROM CHILDREN (20 - 24 months old)

FINITE VERBS (LEFT PERIPHERY):

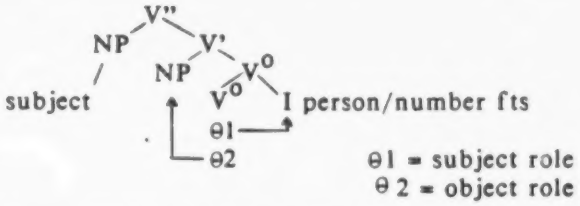
without affixation	**with affix**
(-)	(+t)
ga, doe, hoef, pak, denk	gaat, doet, valt, blijft
(go, do, want, take, think)	(goes, does, falls, stays)
sta, voel, kom, hoor	ligt, komt, slaapt
(stand, feel, come, hear)	(lies, comes, sleeps)
	(+(e)n)
	moeten, zitten, gaan, doen
	sit, go, do)

INFINITE VERBS (RIGHT PERIPHERY)
(+en)
slapen, drinken, maken, pakken
(sleep, drink, make, take)
huilen, wassen, kopen, spelen
(cry, wash, buy, play)

Third, young Dutch children make astonishingly few mistakes in matching a particular verb form with a specific subject, i.e. in having subject-verb agreement. Out of 388 finite utterances with subjects that I checked, I found only 2 forms that were clearly deviating from the paradigm, i.e., the child made a "wrong" combination of a subject with a particular verb form. Therefore, theories that crucially depend on the assumption that child language differs from adult language in that children do not have inflection yet, cannot directly account for the Dutch data. Fortunately, Dutch does not seem to be the only deviant language where the early verbal system is concerned. Recent work on German and French language development provides additional evidence (Hulk (1987), Weissenborn (1988, forthcoming), Verrips & Weissenborn (forthcoming)). There, it is also concluded that children distinguish between finite and non-finite verb forms, and seem to have a sense of subject-verb agreement at a remarkably young age. This does not have to imply that the young child must already have a productive agreement paradigm. It may be that it acquires verbal morphology by building up a word-specific paradigm first, as De Haan (1986) claimed, following Pinker (1984). Every verb form could first be learned with an inherent agreement connotation, before the child realizes that the affix bears this information rather than the entire verb form.

Subjects as specifiers
I will proceed to propose an explanation for the subject requirement, based on subject-verb agreement. On the basis of Weerman (1989), I argue that a subject has to be lexically present to specify the person-number reference that every finite verb has, from the earliest stages on. The V-projection bears the subject -role, which is identified via its inflection, i.e. in finite clauses via the the person and number features. According to Weerman, the I does not have its own projection. I exists as an affix on the head V^0, and is the morphological reflex of information contained in COMP. The only verbal positions in a structure are the V- and COMP-position. The VP-structure and the θ-assignment are exemplified in (14):

(14)



The subject θ-role does not get assigned to a particular syntactic position as is usually assumed, but is assigned only morphologically, to the I-affix. If the morphological features that identify the subject θ-role are somehow "strong" enough, subjects are not obligatory. The person-number reference is then solely determined by inflectional morphology. In languages like Dutch, where the subject reference cannot be determined unambiguously by the person-number features, a subject is required to specify these features. This is defined in Weerman's parameter:

(15) **person-number specification parameter**:
the person-number features have to be
- obligatorily specified
- optionally specified Weerman (1989)

4. INDEPENDENT NON-FINITE STRUCTURES

From this perspective, it is predicted that subjects are not obligatory when there are no person-number features. This is the case with non-finite structures. This involves both projections of infinitive verbs and projections without verbs, the only other syntactic environment where subjects are optional in Dutch. Again, there is no difference between child and adult language here. In (16) and (17) examples are given with and without subjects. The subject constituents are underlined.

(16) Children's independent non-finite structures
a. blaadjes tekenen (Fedra 23)
(leafs-DIM draw-INF)
b. mamma ook een happie eten (Laura 24)
(mommy also a bite-DIM eat-INF)

(17) Adult's independent non-finite structures
a. (Jij) naar Californie fietsen? (Nooit!)
(You to California bike-INF? Never!)
b. (Lisan) taarten bakken? (Laat me niet lachen!)
((Lisan) pastries bake-INF? Don't make me laugh!)

Independent non-finite structures are a typical but insufficiently explained type of structure in Dutch. It is not true that an "infinitive stage" precedes the use of finite structure, even if non-finite structures represent the majority of utterances at first. Finite structures as under (9) occur at all the same stages as the non-finite ones as under (16). And again, independent non-finite structures exist in the adult language as well.

SUBJECT-PREDICATE RELATIONS
The underlined constituents in (16)-(17) bear a subject relation to the infinitive verb, but cannot be subjects by virtue of subject-verb agreement. The infinitive affix -(e)n is not specified for person-number features. Under (18) I list the properties of independent non-finite structures, which are illustrated by the examples under (19) and (20), in addition to the ones under (16) and (17).

(18) Independent non-finite structures
- a. no person-number features => no subjects required
- b. free combination of any two XP's;
  => neither XP is obligatory
  => topic and comment can each be any type of constituent, not just NP and VP (all examples under (19)-(20))
  => subject-predicate relations can exist between two constituents that are not NP and VP (eg. 19b, 20c).
  => other than subject-predicate relations between topic and comment exist (eg. 19a, 20a,b)

(19) Child Dutch
- a. [zo][beter]? (Chantal 24) ADVP AP
  (this way better?)
- b. [ikke][op je nek] (Laura 24) NP PP
  (I on your neck) (subj-pred)
- c. [Joris][blote voeten] (Willemse 1987) NP-NP
  (Joris bare feet)

(20) Adult Dutch
- a. [op de fiets][naar Californi]? Nee toch! AP PP
  (on the bike to California? Surely not)
- b. [morgen][met vakantie]? Toe maar! ADVP PP
  (Tomorrow on vacation? Wow!)
- c. [Eric Flaim][wereldkampioen]? Nooit meer. NP NP
  (Eric Flaim world champion? Never again) (subj-pred)

Since these structures all lack person-number features, it is predicted that subjects are not obligatory. I propose that the constructions under (16)-(17) and (19)-(20) are instances of "topic-comment structure", i.e. a free combination of any two constituents. Neither topic nor comment is ever obligatory. The relation between topic and comment is established through coindexation. Thus, if the comment happens to be a VP, it will carry the subject role. Coindexation with a topic can then result in a subject-predicate relation.

Illocutionary roles
If the child has basically the same grammatical structure as the adult, how can it be that we get the impression that child language is so different from adult language? I will show that there is a subtle non-structural difference between the adult's and the child's topic-comment structures. For adults, most topic-comment structures are impossible with a declarative illocutionary force. Thus, the examples under (18) would be impossible as declaratives in adult Dutch. We can explain this when we take a closer look at the different functioning of COMP in adult language as opposed to child language. According to Weerman, the illocutionary role is derived from the particular modal role, that is assigned by finite COMP. The illocutionary reference is independent when COMP is filled by V, but dependent when filled by a complementizer. So, to get a declarative reading, a finite verb has to be in COMP, and some constituent is topicalized. For adults, a non-finite clause would normally be embedded. An embedded non-finite clause has a [-finite] COMP, that does not get lexicalized. It depends on the matrix clause for mood, tense and subject reference. The independent non-finite structures typically do not have a COMP node. So, if COMP plays a central role in deriving modality in the adult system, and the illocutionary force follows from this, it is predicted that the topic-comment constructions normally do not occur with a non-declarative reading.

At the stage where topic-comment structures occur as declaratives, the child does not have embedded structure yet. COMP only exists as a site for finite verbs. There are

no empty, [-finite] COMPs for the child. At the same time, the child is capable of generating different utterances with different illocutionary forces, such as orders, questions, desires, just like adults, through word order and intonation. So, apparently, the derivation of the illocutionary force is not crucially centered around COMP yet. COMP does not have the full range of abstract functions, but exists solely as a finite verb node. Consequently, the child is not restricted to only finite clauses for declarative sentences.

5. A SUBTLE TRANSITION

We have seen that there is a subtle difference in possible illocutionary forces in children's topic-comment structures, compared to the adult ones. Also, Clahsen (1987) has shown for German that there is a decrease in the percentage of utterances without subjects when the children acquire the morphological means of productive verbal inflection. As I pointed out, the systematic difference is not syntactic in nature, but involves the illocutionary force, which is centered around the functions of COMP. I will show you how the change in illocutionary force is one of many changes centered around the functions of COMP. In (21) I state the related phenomena, comparable to Clahsen's developmental stages for German [3].

(21) Predicted related acquisitional evidence
A. embedded clauses: COMP not only as finite verb anymore
V-position not only infinitive anymore
B. productive agreement paradigms (affixation)
C. decrease/loss of declarative topic-comment structures
D. rise of structures with finite verbs
E. decrease in overall percentage of missing subjects

First, once subordination and thus the complementizer system have been acquired, the full range of abstract functions of COMP must be available to the child. The acquisition of embedded clauses occurs somewhere around the 40th month, according to Clahsen's stages. At about the same time, there is a rise in structures with fronted verbs.

Under my proposal, the coinciding of the phenomena under (21) is not a coincidence. (A) When COMP is filled by a finite complementizer, it can assign finiteness and a modal role to the VP. A finite verb can then occur under the right peripheral V-position as well as under COMP. (B) The inflectional affix on the finite verb is the morphological reflex of the finiteness features assigned by COMP. Consequently, the child should realize that the finite verb is morphologically complex. Indeed, Clahsen also claims that at this stage, the agreement paradigm is acquired, i.e. the child productively uses present and past tense affixation. (C) At this point, we expect a decrease in topic-comment structures as declaratives. A non-finite construction has an empty [-finite] COMP as in adult language, and is thus expected to be dependent, so that mood, tense and person-number features can be specified by the matrix COMP and verb. (D) Under the assumption that the child will not diminish the number of declaratives in its speech, it is predicted that we will find relatively more finite sentences from then on. The only verb-final sentences we will find after the acquisition of subordination will then be either embedded or non-declarative. (E) A decrease in the overall percentage of missing subjects is predicted by my theory in two ways: first, the independent non-finite structures account for a large percentage of subjectless sentences as long as they are used as regular declaratives. But when subordination is acquired, these structures largely disappear as declaratives. Embedded non-finite clauses typically do not have subjects, as (22) indicates:

(22) a. *hij belooft [hij mij te schrijven]
(he promises he me $_{IO}$ to write-INF)

[3] The predictions that follow from my theory and are asserted by the findings of Clahsen for the older children have to be checked for Dutch, of course. Unfortunately, at this point, I do not have access to Dutch data of children over 26 months.

b. hij belooft [mij te schrijven]
(he promises me $_{IO}$ to write-INF)

Consequently, embedded non-finite structures would never be counted as having a "missing subject" and the percentage of utterances with missing subjects would surely drop. Second, we have seen that sentences with the finite verb in COMP allow for missing subjects through topic-drop in both child and adult Dutch. It is very probable that this is true for German too, since German is an SOV-V2 language like Dutch. Missing subjects never occur in other environments than this. That means, when embedded clauses are acquired the child gains a structure that never allows for missing subjects. Again, it is clear how the percentage of utterances with subjects may rise because of this.

6. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Dutch child language provides strong evidence against an initial prodrop parameter setting. In both child and adult Dutch, subjects are necessary elements in finite clauses, to specify the person-number reference. Only through topic-drop are topicalized subjects allowed to be missing. In non-finite structure there is no syntactic requirement for subjects, since there is no person-number reference. The Dutch child seems to have some knowledge of inflection, and a sense of subject verb-agreement at a remarkably young age. Similar conclusions have been drawn for early French and German. In view of this cross-linguistic evidence, proposals to explain missing subjects in English through a lack of inflection deserve serious reconsideration.

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